

Uncle Herbert's Africa Cap

Artefact Biographies and the Social Meaning(s) of the Material Culture of War



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Analysing the Afrikamütze

This short essay—less the introduction, which I have added so that it might stand alone here—comprises Chapter 10 of a proposed second edition of ASRP 8, “The Afrikamütze Database: a Guide to the Identification, Context and Interpretation of the German Army Tropical Peaked Cap, 1940–43”. In addition to the present work, this volume will include a new introduction, new chapters on the cap as a commodity and on cap preservation/conservation, and revised sections on reproduction caps and Generals caps.

Additionally, this new volume will correct a number of errors (mostly typos and incorrect generalisations) present in the first edition; incorporate additional data not available when this was published; while more fully situating my work on the *Afrikamütze* within the context of recent research into the material culture of war. In writing it, I hope to raise the academic profile of research into military uniforms, highlighting their potential interpretative role, and—in particular—challenge an interpretatively inhibiting tabu surrounding those produced under Third Reich.

Permission to re-use Figure 2, which is taken from Mr Höller’s “Sous les Ordres de Rommel: des Déserts d’Afrique du Nord aux Plage de Normandie”, has been requested via his publishers but has not yet been given. It is used here, cropped and restored, under the conditions of “fair dealing” and “sweat of the brow” in British and European copyright law. It will be removed if requested, and, unless formal permission to re-use it is received, it will be omitted from the final, book version of this essay.

Uncle Herbert's Africa cap

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by Mike Seager Thomas

Abstract. In academic studies of the recent material culture of war, uniforms, and in particular uniforms produced under the Third Reich, have been largely ignored. This is attributable in large part to a perceived “toxicity”. But this does not mean that these things are not in fact meaningful, cannot usefully contribute to our understanding of the people and times to which they belonged. Like other antiquities, the military uniform provides a point of personal contact between the present and the past through which the latter can—if interrogated objectively—be realised and confronted.

For this essay the known biographies of five surviving Afrikamützen—an everyday cap worn by Wehrmacht personnel in the WW2 North African theatre (see Seager Thomas, 2019a; 2019c)—are detailed, and used to identify a range of possible social meanings. Highlighted are recurrent oppositions between those of caps retained by axis and allied soldiers, young soldiers and their older selves, and veterans and collectors. These are of relevance irrespective of interpretative paradigm. It is concluded, therefore, that it is a mistake to omit aspects of the material culture of war such as the Afrikamütze from academic study and analysis.

War is bad, a failure of society, and though of universal relevance and thus compelling, its study can be problematical. Its recent material culture means different things to different people, and interest in and—in particular—the collecting of it raises issues, some troubling, which transcend the material itself and what this can tell us about the times and people to which it belonged. This is particularly true of that produced under the Third Reich. Its agency is perceived as so toxic (insensitive, offensive, dangerous) (Hughes, 2021, chapter 8; Kurti, 2011) that it cannot be studied objectively. It is “dark heritage” (Thomas et al., 2019). Its study and collection is a vulgar celebration of war. Trading in it is “perverted” (Pearce, 1995, p. 194) and collectors of it are “Nazi”, “war fetishist”, even “sadomasochistic” (Conti, 2018; Hughes, 2021; Pearce, 1995, pp. 194–95; Sontag, 1980).

The result of these perceptions is that its study is inhibited. On the one hand academia refuses on principal to engage with the collectors of it, within whose hands the bulk of it now resides, and on the other, individual academics

are terrified of being tagged as Nazi, and its study has been abandoned to lay scholars, mostly writing for collectors. These have sometimes produced good work, but all too often they lack the scope, rigour and objectivity demanded of academic inquiry, and overlook or simplify the material's wider, and all important context (Hughes, 2021, pp. 113–16). Typical here are numerous "coffee table"-style reference books (e.g. Fisher, 2011; Fisher and Lock, 2012; Kurtz, 2004). This is regrettable for two reasons. Firstly, the extant record is under immediate threat—from unscrupulous and un-policed dealers, who undermine its integrity by systematically modifying and faking items for profit, and by individual collectors when they fail to pass on a record of their own interventions, or stoutly defend treasured modifications and fakes with which they themselves have been duped (Seager Thomas, 2015; 2019b); and, secondly, because irrespective of one's view of it, the material culture of war, and not least that produced under the Third Reich, is meaningful.

Like other antiquities, the material culture of war provides a point of psychological contact between the present and the past. Time, by weathering its traces, removing its survivors and mediating the record through historical and dramatic reconstructions, and increasingly antiquated—and thus alien—technologies, detaches us from the reality of the past. An object out of the past, mnemonically, has the capacity to restore this to us. We study it to remember. Through its direct associations, the material culture of war—here the *Afrikamütze* (literally, the Africa cap)—brings home to us war's true nature in a stark human equation in which the reality of war is realised and confronted. Moreover, the more tangibly human, the grittier, these associations, the better (Belk, 1988, pp. 149–50; Heidegger, 1971; cf. Carr, 2016, pp. 256–57; Herva et. al., 2016, 277; Schofield, 2005, pp. 92–98).

Elsewhere I have characterised this phenomenon in terms of material charisma (Seager Thomas, 2018), a property imputed by us to cultural and—particularly—religious objects (cf. Taves, 2016; Paine, 2013, p. 118). In the context of the wider study of war, it is also analogous to a "sense of place" attributed to sites and landscapes with wartime associations (e.g. Saunders, 2007, chapter 3). The feelings evoked by a visit to the battlefield and war cemeteries of El Alamein (or the Normandy Beaches, or Fort Douaumont, or Gettysburg) and handling an *Afrikamütze* are not very different, and who, but the most politically correct, would challenge the legitimacy of the interests of most visitors to the former, be these academic, memorialising or touristic. Should we or should we not teach our children about war? Either way, in practical terms, the difference is one of scale only.

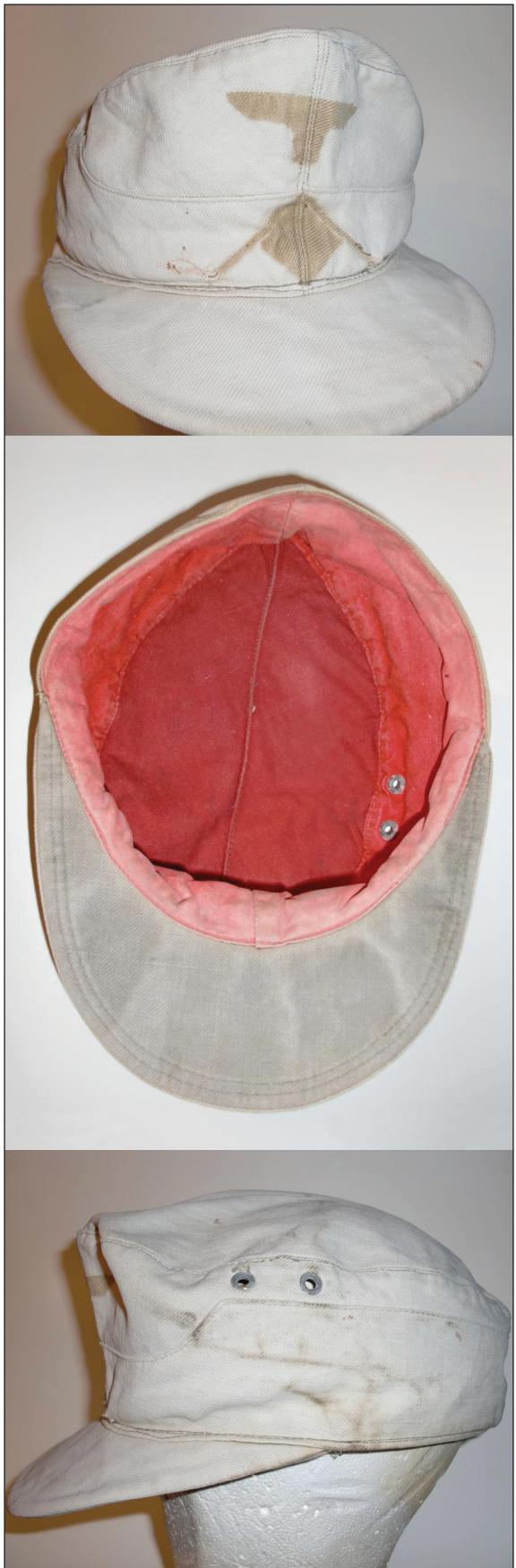
The *Afrikamütze*

The *Afrikamütze* is a cotton-twill cap with a prominent peak, a false turn-up, with a scallop around the front, a red lining, a pair of metal ventilation eyelets on either side, and, after early 1942, a sweatband. The manufacturer's name and later a manufacturer number was stamped on the inside. Insignia consists

or consisted of the army tropical eagle and cockade, applied separately, and, at least until July 1942, when its use was ordered discontinued (Bender and Law, 1973, p. 193; Uniformen Markt, 1942, p. 165), a coloured soutache or inverted Russia braid chevron indicating the wearer's branch of service (e.g. pink for Panzer, red for artillery, green for motorised infantry) (McGuirk, 1987, pp. 153–39). The standard officers' version is piped around the scallop and the top of the cap in silver, the General officers' version in gold. It was called the *Afrikamütze* by German soldiers who wore it in Africa between 1941 and 1943 (*ibid*, 1987, p. 140). Other names and designations applied to it include the M40 or M41 tropical peaked or visored (field) cap (e.g. Cardona, 2022, p.109; Fisher, 2011, pp. 32, 37), the *casquette tropicale du modèle 1940* (Borg and Twiname, 2010), the *Tropeneinheitsfeldmütze* (Halcomb and Saris, 1989, pp. 60–61) and the (*Tropen*)*Feldmütze mit Schirm* (Cardona, 2022, p.109) (*Mütze mit Schirm* in the army *Soldbuch* or paybook). It was worn by German army and *Luftwaffe* personnel throughout the North African campaign, notably the men of the *Afrikakorps*, and period photographs show it in use on Crete and—possibly—the southern Soviet Union from late 1942, and in other hot weather regions in which the *Wehrmacht* was deployed from 1943 (see also Thomas, 2003, pp. 92, 228). It was also worn in northern Europe by soldiers of the “free Indian” legion, the Azad Hind (from at least September 1942) (Bamber, 2010, figures; Littlejohn, 1987, p. 128). The most recent known dated examples belong to 1944, and they were apparently being taken as souvenirs by allied soldiers into 1945. Of the early soutached variant, probably only a few hundred intact examples survive, while surviving WW2 German army tropical peaked caps of all types probably number in the low thousands.

Individual cap biographies

The principal roles of the uniform in 20th-century warfare, and the role of the *Afrikamütze*, were threefold: to clothe the soldier in a way appropriate to the theatre in which he was to operate (e.g. Toppe, 1991 [1952], pp. 8–9), to help forge a group identity (Joseph and Alex, 1972), and to aid recognition in the field (e.g. Jeffreys, 2013, p. 119). A by-product of this was the blurring of personal identity. When issued, the *Afrikamütze*'s meaning was related exclusively to these roles. Initially, the only way it could be acquired was through personal military engagement. Each cap, however, was issued to an individual, saw service with an individual, shared the events that the individual went through, and in many cases bore the traces of those events. Some were then souvenired, or acquired as trophies, by individuals, then given away, sold, bought and/or curated by individuals (many of whom had no association with the military). Thus over time, its meaning was added to, and shifted from the group to the individual, or a succession of individuals. The German soldier's cap became the friend or the enemy's cap (the *Afrikaner's* cap), the *Afrikaner's* cap became Uncle (or *Onkel*) Herbert or Grandad's cap; Uncle

**Figure 1**

Hans Höller's Afrikamütze in 2011 (Photo: WAF)

Herbert's cap became Ballarat RSL club's cap or collector X's cap, and so on. This is the cap's "biography" (Kopytoff, 1986, pp. 66–68). The cap embodies each and all of these people, and things, and herein lies its importance to us today, for through it, it and they can be re-experienced (Prown, 1993, pp. 2–3). Of course it is also an emblem of war. It sports—or sported—the dread swastika; stamped in it are the names of places undone by war; some perhaps were manufactured using prisoner labour. These things we must not forget. But knowledge of a cap's associations—with events, places and ideas—and the feelings evoked by these, and of the variable interactions between it and its successive owners, also brings home to us a wider "social" meaning (cf. Joy, 2002; Richardson, 2013, pp. 109–16; Saunders, 2005, p. 78), without which a holistic understanding the period is impossible.

In order to illustrate this, I here describe and discuss five *Afrikamützen* with differing historical trajectories.

The first cap is that of Austrian 15 *Panzer-Division* veteran and autobiographer Hans Höller. The cap is a bleached, early model other ranks' (1_OR) cap, probably manufactured by the Berlin manufacturing consortium LAGO, which has been stripped of its insignia to reveal something close to its original buff colour (**Figure 1**). Most likely it was issued at the Division depot at Kaiserslautern, close to which Hans was quartered. It accompanied him on the train to

Naples and Taranto, where he took passage for Tripoli on the former passenger liner *Neptunia*, which was later sunk by the British with much loss of life. A photograph of his shows him on-board wearing his new, unfaded cap (Höller, 2017, p. 34).

Hans Höller and his cap's African story begins with him and his fellows "imagining themselves as if in the old novels of Karl May, riding a camel or camping in oases" (*ibid.*, p. 31).¹ After arrival in Libya in June 1941 (**Figure 2**) and a brief sojourn in the desert outside Tripoli for acclimatisation, he was posted to the HQ company of *Panzerjägerabteilung 33* as driver and messenger, and stationed close to the front-line, first at Sollum on the Egyptian frontier and later Tobruk. Because of his job, his life there was one of routine,

Figure 2

Hans (left) in Tripoli, in 1941, wearing his unfaded *Afrikamütze* (Photo: Hans Höller)



and his experience of action limited to occasional episodes of incoming artillery fire. There were repeated motorcycle journeys between Sollum and Halfaya, there was training on new weaponry, there was guard duty; water was scarce, dust got everywhere and stomach complaints were rife; but there were also trips to the beach, encounters with Arabs, visits to ancient sites, and a return visit to Tripoli—many of these, as other photographs of his show, wearing his now faded *Afrikamütze* (*ibid.*, pp. 47–51).

This first part of Han's African story lasted from June to November 1941, when he fell seriously ill and was evacuated by air from Derna to Greece—wearing, as we see in another of his photographs, his bone white cap (*ibid.*, p. 57).

1 Karl May, a late 19th–early 20th-century German author of travel adventures

When he completed it a year later, serving briefly in northern Tunisia, where he was wounded in his only action there, it was as an officer and in a different cap (*ibid.*, p. 78). But he kept his original faded *Afrikamütze*, and he retained this, albeit stripped of its insignia, through 65-odd years of professional life and retirement till, in 2011, he gave it to a collector who promised him that he would restore it to its former service condition. Its story, therefore, goes on—as part of that collection, and now—like the other caps described and discussed here—as an object of academic inquiry.

The second cap is in the collection of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra (**Figures 3**). It is a faded, soutache-removed, 1_OR by the Frankenstein firm, Schlesische Mützenfabrik, dated 1941. (Frankenstein, now Ząbkowice Śląskie, was alienated to Poland after WW2). The interest of this



Figure 3

The “Australian War Memorial” cap, photographed in New Zealand in the 1980s (Photo: D. McGuirk)

cap is that it first lost and then re-found its provenance. The removal of its soutache indicates that it was in use after July 1942, when these were ordered removed, and the Australian War Memorial, noting a tuft of red soutache above the cockade, correctly infers that it was probably worn by a member of an artillery unit. The Australian War Memorial record also notes that its cockade has been roughly re-sewn. But that is all. It knows—or says—nothing of who souvenired it, when or where (Australian War Memorial, 2022).

In fact, the cap was picked up by a New Zealand soldier at the end of 1942, or very early in 1943, in a position hastily vacated by the Germans, at the time commonwealth forces were advancing rapidly towards Tripoli along the Gulf of Sirte, after their victory at El Alamein. It is *not* therefore

the souvenir of an *Australian* Digger as its presence in the Australian War Memorial might suggest. How it lost its provenance is a mystery. It was sold by the veteran whose souvenir it was to a collector in New Zealand some time during the mid-1980s (at this point in its history, its cockade had already been re-sewn, and it is assumed therefore that its re-sewing is a period repair), and in the early 1990s, sold on to an Australian collector apparently eager for a cap to accompany a faded tunic, also souvenired at El Alamein. Possibly this collector, a resident of New South Wales, was employed by the Memorial. What happened to the cap between then and its appearance on the Australian War Memorial website, and who is responsible for the loss of its history, the Australian collector, the Australian War Memorial, or an unrecorded intermediary, is unknown.



Figure 4

Afrikakorps veteran Ulrich Grass with his tropical uniform in 2012 (Photo: name withheld)

The third cap is that of Ulrich Grass (**Figure 4**), a former *Oberleutnant* in *Panzer-regiment 5*, who wore it from its issue in Germany in March 1941 to July 1941, when he was shot by an allied sniper—most likely Australian—close to the Tobruk perimeter.² The cap is an undated, early model officers' cap (1_O) by the Berlin manufacturer Robert Lubstein, with its original cockade and pink (Panzer) soutache. The present eagle, however, is a replacement, the original having been removed by Ulrich after the war out of fear that if he retained it he would be tagged as a Nazi. The cap is heavily faded, and a

² The AIF at Tobruk was known for its skilful and aggressive use of sniping (Miller, 1986, pp. 30, 43, 47)

photo showing it prior to its restoration (**Figure 4**), reveals, like Hans Höller's cap, its original colour—in this case olive brown. Such heavy fading after just a few months in the desert (it contrasts with that of his tunic, which also survives, and which would have been worn much less often than the cap) (D. McGuirk, pers. comm.) is attributable to the strong sun, but also its use by a tank soldier, and the soiling and frequent rough washing occasioned by this.

After being wounded Ulrich was evacuated by air to a hospital in Naples. Owing to the severity of his wound, he did not return to active service in Africa, but instead spent the next couple of years at *Panzer-regiment 5*'s base depot in Wündsdorf, south of Berlin, until, in February 1945, he was transferred to the Oder with the rest of the depot personnel to fight the approaching Russians,



Figure 5

Ulrich's *Afrikamütze* after restoration (Photo: name withheld)

finishing the last few weeks of the war as an infantryman. Throughout this period, his tropical uniform, which as an officer Ulrich would have owned, remained at his parents' home. He then kept it till 2012 when he gave it to a German *Afrikakorps* enthusiast and collector he had come to know through the *Verband Deutsches Afrikakorps* (the *Afrikakorps* veterans' association). During this time, he attached an *Afrikakorps* cuff title to the tunic, but both his *Afrikamütze* and the tunic remained without eagles, and it was only after the uniform had passed to the German collector that these were replaced by a professional seamstress with appropriately weathered eagles sourced from a collector abroad (**Figure 5**).

The fourth cap (**Figure 6**) was the souvenir of a New Zealand soldier, Ted Manning, who served in North Africa with the 21st New Zealand Infantry Battalion. The cap, a near mint 1_OR, also by the manufacturer Robert Lubstein, is undated, and notable for its hand sewn eagle and cockade, a rare, probably very early feature of tropical peaked caps by Lubstein, and for (the manufacturer) its non-standard under peak stitching (see Seager Thomas, 2019a, pp. 77–79). It has an apple green soutache, and was probably intended for use by a motorised infantryman.

The cap was one of “hundreds” of unissued caps found by the New Zealanders while picking-over an abandoned forward supply dump near Gazala in mid-December 1941, after the *Afrikakorps*' retreat from the area. Ted described how his fellows were “stuffing their pockets full” with them. Most were taken for sanitary purposes, but Ted took his as a souvenir. He recalled all sorts of webbing and uniform parts—shirts, boots, rucksacks—in wooden boxes stacked up on blocks over a large area and covered by camouflage netting. There was even a box full of different-sized batteries. The New Zealanders, Ted said, were looking for food. Ted sent the cap to his wife in Auckland where it was worn by his nephew (hence



Figure 6

Ted Manning's cap (Photos: top and middle, author; bottom, Dal McGuirk)

"near mint" rather than "mint"), joining hundreds of other *Afrikamützen*, which were sent home from the front by fathers and uncles, and worn by children in school playgrounds all over Australia and New Zealand during and after the war. (A heavily worn Australian souvenir, which has been marked "Robert. A" using a magic marker, may be another example) (**Figure 7**).³



Figure 7

Officer's cap by the Berlin manufacturer Robert Lubstein marked "Robert. A" using a "magic marker" (Photo: Virtual Grenadier)

The cap remained in the Manning family till the 1970s. Ted was active in, and eventually became president of, the 21st New Zealand Infantry Battalion association, during which time he met and became friendly with *Afrikakorps* historian and former collector Dal McGuirk, to whom he gave it in 1978. One day over tea and cakes in the association club, Ted announced, "I've got a German cap you can have, if you want it", handing it over to a thrilled McGuirk a few days later (McGuirk, 2021). Only later, pressured by McGuirk, did he accept payment for it. McGuirk numbers the cap amongst his favourites, and it is shown in his book *Rommel's Army in Africa* (McGuirk, 1987, pl. 46) (**Figure 6**, bottom), in *Militaria Magazine* (Borg and Twiname, 2010, p. 30) and my own *The Afrikamütze Database* (Seager Thomas, 2019a, fig. 1.50). The cap was sold in 2021.

The last cap is another a 1941-dated 1_OR Schlesische Mützenfabrik. It is in near mint condition, and has a lime green (motorised infantry) soutache (**Figure 8**). (Schlesische Mützenfabriks and Robert Lubsteins are the most frequently encountered makes of the WW2 German army tropical peaked cap). In the mid 1990s, this cap was given by the veteran whose souvenir it was, and who by then had kept it for more than 50 years, to the same enthusiast and collector to whom Ulrich Grass later gave his cap. Its short biography is a peculiar one. It was issued for service in North Africa in mid-1941 but got no further than Naples, where the soldier fell ill and was hospitalised. Realising that he was unlikely to reach Africa, the soldier then took it from his locker, and with the help of his nurses, had it wrapped up and mailed to his mother's address in Germany, reporting it as stolen to the hospital administration. He

³ Though invented prior to WW2, the widespread use of the felt-tip pen dates from the 1950s on

said to the collector to whom he gave it in the 1990s that he had liked the cap very much and did not wish to lose it! The veteran and collector met at an *Afrikakorps* reunion and it is assumed therefore that the former did eventually reach Africa and become an *Afrikaner*—but wearing a replacement cap!



Figure 8
German souvenir *Afrikamütze* (Photo: name withheld)

The social meaning(s) of the *Afrikamütze*

Five caps cannot of course stand in for the estimated hundreds of *Afrikamützen* (and thousands of German army tropical peaked caps) that survive today. What they do show us, however, is the variability in their biographies and therefore possible meanings, and, by highlighting a series of recurrent thematic oppositions in their biographic relationships—allied/axis; life/death; war/post-war; past/present; youth/age; soldier/collector or museum professional—the likely nature(s) of these. In the case of the *Afrikamütze*, similarity in form and original purpose was not indicative of a single social meaning.

Principal amongst these oppositions is that between those caps retained by *Afrikakorps* veterans and those acquired by allied servicemen. To begin with their known—as opposed to their actual—associations differ. In the *Afrikakorps* soldier's cap is crystallised a specific service history from the cap's issue to the soldier's departure from theatre, with all its accreted and changing meanings—service, *esprit de corps*, camaraderie, travel, drama, hardship, fear, resolve and (ultimately) personal survival—in many cases indicated by the appearance of the cap. It therefore was often treasured—and sometimes for a

lifetime. By contrast, the allied souvenir or trophy lacked an individual service history, instead recalling the single episode when it was acquired (many allied souvenirs are labelled with the names of the places where they were picked up) (**Figure 9**), the North African theatre generally, and, as evidenced by its occasional, almost ritual despoliation and the inclusion amongst them of overt souvenirs of the dead, the individual allied soldier's feelings towards his German enemy. Consequently, it did not have the particular poignancy of those caps retained by individual axis soldiers, and was more freely traded or given away. Immediately post-war this opposition was reinforced when, owing to differing attitudes towards the swastika—political correctness, fear, shame, indifference, disdain—the souvenirs of former axis soldiers were de-Nazified and those of allied veterans were not.

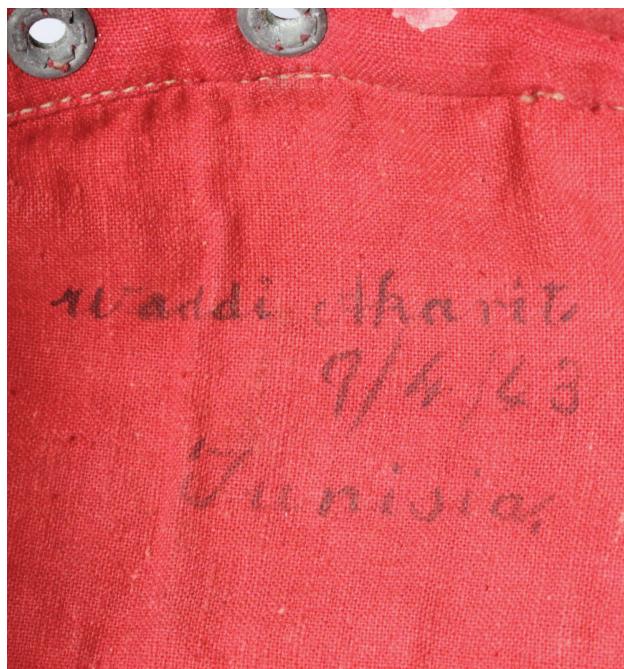


Figure 9

Ink label inside a cap picked up by a New Zealand serviceman at Wadi Akarit in southern Tunisia (Photo: D. McGuirk)

With the transition from the past to the present, the young soldier to his older self, the latter was distanced from his past and his attitude to this altered, becoming, on the one hand, nostalgic and on the other more reflective. For the *Afrikakorps* veteran, not least after the 1994 exhibition *The Wehrmacht and Genocide* (Hamburg Institute for Social Research, 1999), there was perhaps a need to assert the relative decency of *his* war (e.g. Bierman and Smith, 2002, p. 5; Höller, 2017, p. 233).⁴ His souvenirs reminded him of his youth, but also of his comrades who had passed away, both during the war and subsequently; the souvenir—in this case the *Afrikamütze*—now a mantle to be passed on to someone who would honour what it had come to represent. Up to a point this new nostalgia and reflection applied both to axis and allied soldiers. Hence their occasional gifting by

⁴ Despite the claims of some revisionist commentators (e.g. Felton, 2022; Paterson, 2011), little evidence has been adduced that the *Wehrmacht* in North Africa was itself guilty of war crimes—on the contrary (e.g. Kitchen, 2009, p. 10)

both of objects to younger, respectful and enthusiastic collectors, and to museums.

The relationship of a veteran to his cap and the relationship of a collector or a museum curator to the same cap, however, is very different, and herein lies another dominant opposition. Paradoxically, the cap's earlier valuation is reversed. The axis veteran's cap, because it has been stripped, becomes less valuable, whereas the allied veteran's cap, because it has not been stripped, becomes more valuable. What is of interest to the collector and the curator is a generic *Afrikakorps* cap, rather than Hans Höller's or Ted Manning's cap and hence his readiness to reconstruct, to privilege particular parts of a cap's biography over others, and—in the case of the Australian War Memorial cap—to discard a known provenance altogether. In an unconscious process of "trivialization" (cf. Mosse, 1991, pp. 126, 153), the individual cap's ability to evoke the reality of war and the soldier's personal experience of it is diminished, and the memory of war idealised, debased and made safe. I am of course generalising: individual collectors and perhaps museum professionals value the material culture of war for a variety of reasons, including—sometimes—its particular wartime and post-war biographies; but the fact remains that in the collectors' market a stripped *Afrikamütze* is less valuable than an intact one, and that collectors (and dealers) routinely "restore" caps to a supposed original, or more desirable condition.

The interpretative importance of the *Afrikamütze*

The biographies of individual *Afrikamützen* are of course important for a wide variety of reasons. The *Afrikamütze* was manufactured during war, and for war, and can bring this home to us in many ways. I have already referred here to the dead and the alienated. It was a product of the Third Reich and does—or did—bear the swastika, and for many these are problematical, and not just in terms of a particular object's day-to-day history. Details of their places of manufacture and dates of manufacture contribute to our understanding of resource procurement. For example, caps acquired by Australian and New Zealand troops in the Western Desert (mostly in 1941 and 1942) tended to be of early—mostly 1940—date,⁵ while, so far, not a single 1943-dated cap is known to have seen service in the North African theatre, even though the campaign continued into May that year, indicating a considerable time lag between manufacture and issue and service in theatre (Seager Thomas, 2019a, pp. 14, 24). Also, the verification of authenticity provided by caps with a known biography is central to the identification of authentic caps generally (*ibid.*, p. 5). But above all it is what they tell us about the individual soldier, and later the individual collector, that is important—what he thought about war, the *Afrikakorps*, his enemy, Nazism,

⁵ *Afrikakorps* historian Dal McGuirk estimates that of the 75-odd caps acquired in the Western Desert by Australian and New Zealand soldiers between 1941 and 1942 seen by him, more than 40% were dated 1940, with the remaining caps divided equally between 1941 and 1942 (D. McGuirk, pers. comm.)

etc.; what he now thinks important about the past and its material culture.

Conclusion

By bringing home to us the everyday humanity of the individual soldier, the cap biography brings alive and helps put into context the history of the period, and in so doing provides an invaluable counterweight, qualification and/or addition to existing knowledge and views on this, about service in North Africa and in the *Afrikakorps* (see Bierman and Smith, 2002, pp. 2, 4; Fay, 1945; Kitchen, 2009, p. 10; McGuirk, 1987, pp. 7, 37–68; Young, 1950, pp. 138–39, etc.), and about service in the armed forces of the Third Reich generally (Heer, 1995; Neitzel and Welzer, 2013 etc.). Importantly, this

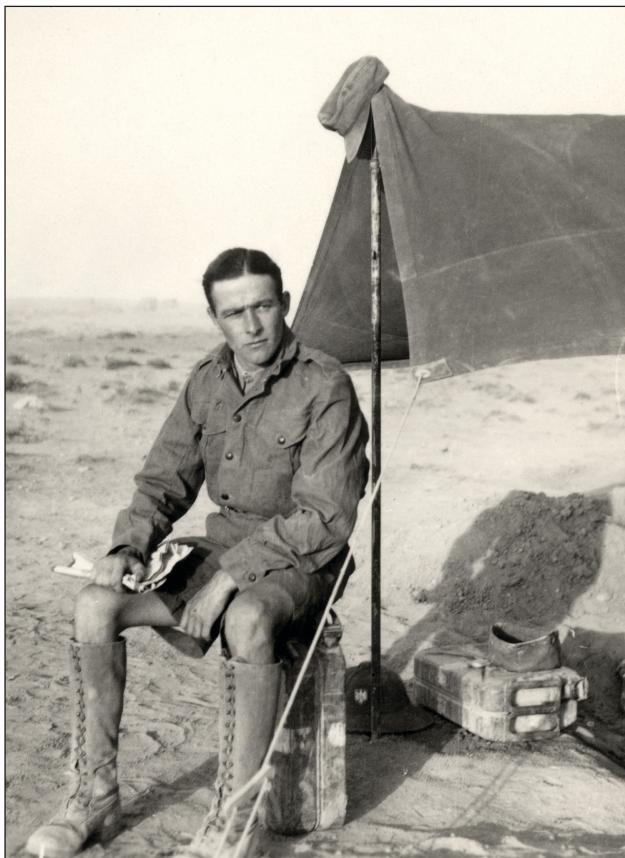


Figure 10
Every *Afrikamütze* tells a story (Photo:
author's collection)

applies irrespective of the particular stakeholder's interpretative paradigm. In order meaningfully to interpret war, and our relationship to it, we must understand people, and not just those aspects of people that accord with our—with academia's—political and moral preconceptions. Much the same applies with regard to the caps' later curators, the collector and the museum professional.

Who would suppose that a piece of standardised uniform clothing could prove so potent interpretatively? Or am I over interpreting here? The foregoing is an anthropological perspective that not everyone shares. Also, old men do not always remember correctly, and—sometimes—wilfully edit or elaborate their memories. It is possible therefore that what I have recorded is inaccurate.

But for the purpose of this discussion, this does not matter—on the contrary, for such distortion, such a rejection, also forms part of the cap's biography. The point is that the *Afrikamütze* is not just a cap, the material culture of war is not just *material* culture, it and they are *social* culture as well. It is wrong therefore to omit them from cultural and social analyses of the war and post-war periods.

Variations in patina amongst the 530-odd caps studied by the writer imply a variety of different cap biographies, and therefore possible cap meanings, but only in a small number of cases are these actually known (e.g. Seager Thomas, 2019a, table 1.3). This is a significant loss for the history of both WW2 and the post-war period. It is important to emphasise, however, that every authentic *Afrikamütze* (indeed, every trace of the material culture of war) has its biography—*known or unknown*—and bares witness to the past (**Figure 10**). Each and every one of them is a tangible and invaluable part of the collective memory of that past. This essay attempts to give the reader a sense of this.

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